

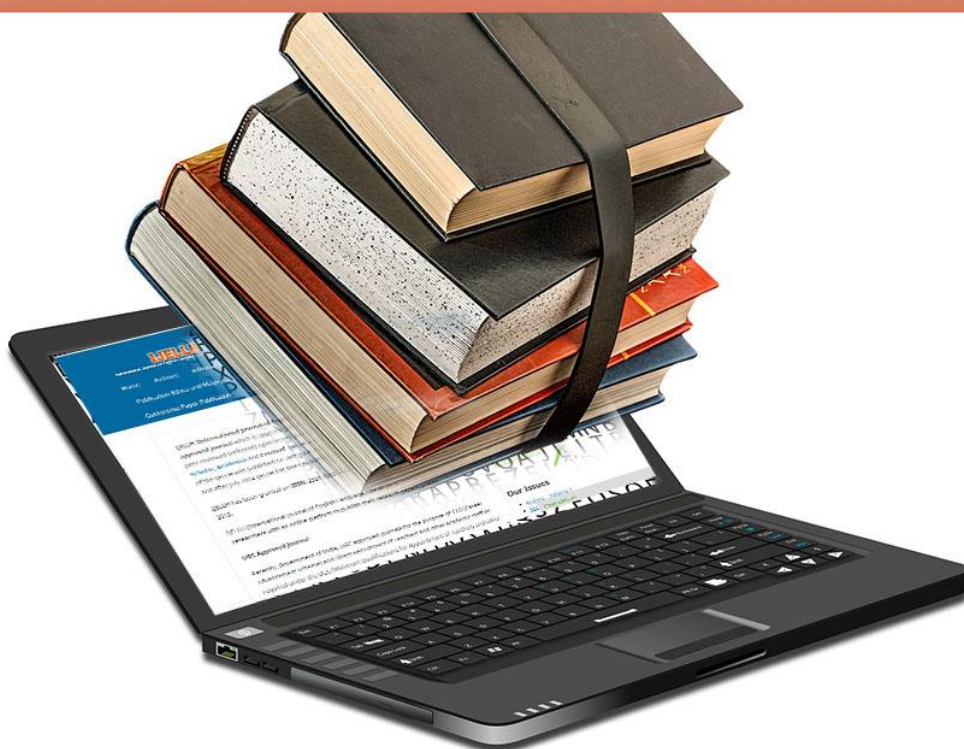
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Politics/Dynamics of Gender in Afghanistan: A Study of Jenny Nordberg's

The Underground Girls of Kabul – The Hidden Lives of Afghan Girls Disguised as Boys

Abstract

The life of almost every Afghan woman over the years has not been without turbulence due to traditional, societal norms which form the intrinsic part of Afghan culture. The recent official discovery of the practice of bacha posh (young girls are dressed up and raised as boys) in Afghanistan by an American journalist, Jenny Nordberg has resulted in a more serious academic engagement. She has given a detailed account of her interview with few bacha posh women in her non-fiction work, The Underground Girls of Kabul – The Hidden Lives of Afghan Girls Disguised as Boys. This paper is an attempt to delve deeper into the psyche of these women and examine the various forms of gendered violence which has struck the core of Afghan society. It mainly explores the factors surrounding the age-old practice of bacha posh

in Afghanistan and understands both the damaging and positive impact of the practice on the lives of Afghan women.

Keywords: bacha posh, gendered violence, Afghan women

The term *bacha posh* literally construed from the local Dari language means a "girl dressed like a boy". *Bacha posh* children, not just dressing up as boys but it is announced to the world that "she" is a "boy". The practice was prevalent in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It was not exposed to the outside world due to the complexities involved in the politics of gender. Though it is a hidden convention, many families are aware that it is being practised in many of their known people's households. It is not a legally accepted practice in Afghanistan. Consequently, the official number of *bacha posh* in Afghanistan is not accurate.

The provenance of *bacha posh* is not legitimately documented. However, as Nordberg observes, Triaria of Rome joined her emperor husband in war, wearing men's armour in the first century. It is indicative of the fact that cross dressing was a reality way back in the first century. A black and white picture shows that women were dressed in men's clothing. The history of Afghan women has been meagerly recorded. The sociological research in Afghanistan conducted mostly by foreign men who did not have access to women, brought out only a partial history of Afghanistan.

Before we understand the reasons for the practice of *bacha posh* in Afghanistan, it is pivotal to perceive few of the cultural practices in Afghanistan. Undoubtedly, Afghanistan is a patriarchal and patrilineal country. Gerda Lerner, an American scholar, reveals that patriarchy dates back to second millennium BC. But unfortunately, few countries continued to practise in its raw form (Nordberg 45). The social standing of women in Afghanistan requires serious attention. There are many countries trying recurrently to transform the Afghan society by gradually plummeting gender disparity because gender parity is a threat to the development of

any nation. The pain and trauma Afghan women undergo can be culminated in the few lines written by an Afghan author, Roya. She says, “My shoulders are heavy, with the weight of pains... I would love to be anything in nature, But not a woman, Not an Afghan woman” (Nordberg x). With such statements, she becomes the voice for millions of Afghan women who feel the same.

As Nordberg observes, two former kings of Afghanistan, Amanullah Khan (1919–29) and Mohammed Zahir Shah (1933–73) tried to establish gender equality under the banner of modernization agenda and state communism. However, they could not succeed due to the inherent patriarchal system. It suggests that repeated efforts were made to bring in gender parity from the time of monarchs too, but they were all in vain.

There are several reasons for the practice of *bacha posh* in Afghanistan. Primarily, it is a dishonor to the family if there are no sons at home. Likewise, girls are not given the privileges bestowed on boys. Another belief is that if they convert a girl to *bacha posh*, in the subsequent delivery a ‘real’ boy child would be born. There was no opportunity for girls’ education, no permission to go outdoors without a male family member or, no permission to work outdoors. In such a troubled zone, *bacha posh* came as solace. *Bacha posh* would be of great help to the family as s/he could escort the girls to school as they were not allowed to go without a family male companion. The ill-treatment and humiliation, the women would have faced in the various stages of their lives, forced them to turn their daughters to *bacha posh*. However, it is fundamental to understand the factors which either make or break the identity or personality of such a girl/woman.

Jenny Nordberg in her book, *The Underground Girls of Kabul*, portrays real insight into the practice of *bacha posh*; style of the book gives a raw image of the life of few *bacha posh* women in Afghanistan. To begin with, Azita, the eldest daughter of Prof. Mo+urtaza (the only postgraduate from his town, Badghis) was asked to turn to part time *bacha posh* as there

was no son in the family who would help the father to manage the store. Azita's positive attitude towards *bacha posh* makes people who probe about identity crisis spellbound. She says, the years that she lived as a boy has helped her all her life, it made her more energetic and resilient. which paved way for her journey from small town Badghis to the country capital Kabul as a Member of Parliament. That's enough testimony that *bacha posh* has had a positive impact on her life.

On the other hand, Niima, as a *bacha posh* was never happy. As a *bacha posh* what one aspires would be freedom and greater privileges, but for Niima it was just hard labour for the sake of family's survival. It is very unfortunate that children's rights are not taken into consideration in a war-torn, chaotic country. Extreme poverty has given way for the parents to take such a decision. The memories of childhood could be very disturbing for Niima as she was forced to take on a different gender.

Even in Shubnum's case, the transition from girl to boy was not because her parents did not have a son but because her mother was a divorcee with two daughters and a son. In the society she would have better reputation, if she had more sons. Reputation plays a very predominant role in the maze of Afghan social and cultural framework. As a woman, going against the traditional conventions is unacceptable. The entire process of the treatment of a particular gender changes due to situational challenges. Girl child is portrayed as "a particular type of female child... a victimized, traumatized, helpless child who sits at the intersection of various sociopolitical ills" (Heidemann & Ferguson, 178).

To understand Zahra's case, we need to understand how family members treat a *bacha posh*, once she attains puberty. Zahra wanted to continue her role as a *bacha posh* but her mother insisted her to change back to a woman. This period was extremely tempestuous as she underwent strange feelings. She preferred to renounce her physical sex and viewed her female body as something that needs change. As Nordberg points out that things become

environment, where most people did not care whether she wore a head scarf or a pair of pants, and where women had more opportunities?” (Nordberg 149). Most probably the response could be no. The social strictures, force the perpetually subjugated girls/ women in Afghanistan to aspire to be more privileged boys/men. In such a confused situation, the very question of identity will come under scrutiny. Some *bacha posh* women strive hard to come to terms with the actual gender. We have all heard about refugees living in a foreign country or people living as refugees within their own country but how horrifying it could be for a woman to live as a refugee in her own body. For a *bacha posh*, it is nothing less than a refugee, when she resumes her original gender. As Judith Butler puts it, “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of a being.... gender proves to be performance – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be” Butler 33) *Bacha posh* finds it quite challenging to accept her old-new role as a woman as she would have spent most of her childhood performing the duties of a boy. There is a complete paradigm shift in her identity. She has to deconstruct the privileged/unprivileged life she had led for over a decade or so and conform to the traditional societal rules.

Another *bacha posh* woman, Nader, in her forties is still unmarried. She refuses to part from her status as a *bacha posh*. Though written law permits women to drive vehicles or inherit property or divorce, the unwritten rules in Afghanistan play a very significant role. They take the upper hand in comparison to legal rules. Nader was attacked by several men for transgressing the boundaries (for instance, driving a car) set by patriarchal society. The male hegemony creates a very well defined path for a daughter/ daughter in law/sister/wife in the Afghan society. Anyone who contravenes the set rules becomes an object of admonition. Girl child is considered as a commodity which is traded in marriage. She has no rights on her father’s property. Sato says, “Inheritance and household assets in Afghanistan are passed only

through the male lineage because her presence in her birth family is considered temporary” (Sato, 137). In contrast to the popular practice of fathers not supporting their daughters to pursue their dreams, Nader’s father supported her throughout her life. He said, “Do what you feel good about and what you are comfortable with. It is your own choice in this life.” He did not confine himself or his daughter to the preset societal norms. Nader says, “once you have gone through the early teenage years as a man there is no turning back, when you go against nature, nature will follow, adjusting the body to the mind” (Nordberg 208). She remains a *bacha posh* and at times, she is slightly unsure of definitive gender. The clash between genders might perpetuate throughout her life.

The real problem is not the practice of *bacha posh*, rather the women’s rights which is a profound concern. As Nordberg expresses, there are three types of gender in Afghanistan - male, *bacha posh* (other gender) and female. The preferential gender is also in the same order. The *real boy* gets the superior status, *bacha posh* gets the intermediary status whereas the *girl* gets the most inferior status. Domestic abuse of women in Afghanistan is at its highest in comparison to other countries. According to the report given by Global Rights: Partners for Justice, “an overwhelming majority of women, 87.2%, experienced at least one form of physical, sexual, or psychological violence or forced marriage, and most, 62.0%, experienced multiple forms of violence” (Nordberg 322). These alarming statistics are a clear evidence that it is time to provide equal opportunities and stop violence against women which in turn contributes to the development of Afghan society.

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